DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 278 238 FL 016 370

AUTHOR Morrow, Keith
TITLE Testing Performance in Oral Interaction.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 9p.; In: Savignon, Sandra J., Ed. and Berns, Margie S., Ed. Communicative Language Teaching: Where Are We Going? Urbana, Language Learning Laboratory, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1983; see FL 016 358. Some pages contain small print.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160) -- Journal Articles (080)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Skills; *Communicative Competence (Languages); *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *Language Proficiency; *Language Tests; *Oral Language; Second Language Instruction; Test Construction; Test Format; Test Use; Test Validity; *Verbal Tests
IDENTIFIERS *Royal Society of Arts Examinations Board (England)

ABSTRACT

The oral interaction examination used by Britain's Royal Society of Arts for testing communicative use of English as a foreign language is described. The underlying principles of the test, its structure, administration, issues of reliability and validity, and scoring are outlined. Three components of the test itself are included. One component is a five-minute interview task and the materials on which the interview is based. The second and third components are a choice of tasks to be performed with another student and an explanation of the task to be given to a teacher. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Studies in Language Learning (1983), 4, 170-177.

ED278238

TESTING PERFORMANCE IN ORAL INTERACTION

KEITH MORROW[1]

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
B. Mainoas
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL016370

[1]Keith Morrow is the Director (Education), Bell Educational Trust, and Chief Examiner, RSA Examinations in Communicative Use of English as a Foreign Language.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The testing procedures described in this paper are employed in the Oral Interaction examination, set by the Royal Society of Arts in the "Examination in the Communicative use of English as a Foreign Language." This examination is now becoming widely established in the United Kingdom, and increasingly overseas, as a measure of what candidates can actually *do* when using English as a foreign language. It measures the candidates' performance on a range of pre-specified tasks in terms of its relationship to established criteria. It is thus an examination based on performance as a reflection of underlying competence, and the definition and description of the levels of performance appropriate to the different levels of the examination proved to be one of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of the examination development.

The examinations are offered twice a year at three levels (Basic, Intermediate, Advanced) in four areas (Reading, Listening, Writing, Oral Interaction). The candidate is free to enter any combination of areas at any combination of levels--except that for administrative reasons the same area may not be entered at more than one level at one session. The advantage of this is that it allows a candidate to build up a profile of performance which corresponds to his/her own actual strengths and weaknesses in English. Thus, for example, an Arab student may enter Listening and Oral Interaction at Advanced level, while taking Intermediate-level Reading and perhaps only Basic-level Writing; a Japanese student, on the other hand, may take Reading at Advanced level, Writing at Intermediate, Oral Interaction at Basic level and Listening not at all. Every candidate receives a certificate showing exactly what he/she has passed, at what level and, crucially, a brief statement of what it means to have obtained this result.

This notion of "knowing what it means" to achieve a given level of task-performance is crucial to the whole concept of the examinations. It is defined along three parameters. The first of these is *operation*. This delineates the tasks that the candidate is expected to perform at different levels of the examination. For example in Reading at Basic level, one of the operations is "Searching through a text to locate a specific piece of information," while at Intermediate level the candidate may be asked to "Skim through the text to establish the gist." The listing of operations is cumulative, so that those appearing at Basic level may also be tested at Intermediate and Advanced levels. The higher levels will differ from the lower, however, in requiring the candidate to display a higher *degree of skill* in performing these operations on a wider range of *text-types*. This last is a familiar concept to language teachers and testers. It is easy to accept that reading a popular newspaper report is "different" from reading an academic textbook, and that performance on one does not necessarily imply performance on the other. But it is the *degree of skill* that is perhaps the most innovative and the most practically useful criterion, especially in the productive tests of Writing and Oral Interaction. The *degree of skill* specification for Oral Interaction tests is set out in Figure 1. As should by now be clear, this shows *how well* the candidates must perform; *what* they must do, and in terms of what *text-types* is specified elsewhere.

So far this paper has been concerned with general statements of principle and intent. Let us look in more detail at the Oral Interaction examination to see how these are applied in practice.

	BASIC	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
Accuracy	Pronunciation may be heavily influenced by L1 and accented though generally intelligible. Any confusion caused by grammatical/lexical errors can be clarified by the candidate.	Pronunciation still obviously influenced by L1 though clearly intelligible. Grammatical/lexical accuracy is generally high, though some errors which do not destroy communication are acceptable.	Accurate in pronunciation, though some residual accent is acceptable. Grammatical/lexical accuracy is very high.
Appropriacy	Use of language broadly appropriate to function, though no subtlety should be expected. The intention of the speaker can be perceived without excessive effort.	Use of language generally appropriate to function. The overall intention of the speaker is always clear.	Use of language entirely appropriate to context, function and intention.
Range	Severely limited range of expression is acceptable. May often have to search for a way to convey the desired meaning.	A fair range of language is available to the candidate. He is able to express himself without overtly having to search for words.	Few limitations on the range of language available to the candidate. Little obvious use of avoidance strategies.
Flexibility	Need not usually take the initiative in conversation. May take time to respond to a change of topic. Interlocutor may have to make considerable allowances and often adopt a supportive role.	Is able to take the initiative in a conversation, and to adapt to new topics or changes of direction--though neither of these may be consistently manifested.	Contributes well to the interaction and will take the initiative. Little strain is imposed on the interlocutor.
Size	Contributions generally limited to one or two simple utterances are acceptable.	Most contributions may be short, but some evidence of ability to produce more complex utterances and to develop these into discourse should be manifested.	Candidates should be able to produce lengthy and developed responses and contributions.

© RSA 1982. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 1. Tests of oral interaction: degrees of skill.

The examination is in three parts. In Part I, the candidate talks alone with an interlocutor; in Part II a pair of candidates discuss a "problem" together and decide on an appropriate course of action; in Part III the candidates report back to the interlocutor (who has been absent during Part II) what they have been doing and the decision they have reached. They must explain and justify their proposed course of action to the interlocutor. During the whole of Parts I, II and III, the candidates' performance is observed by an assessor, who judges whether or not each candidate reaches the required performance (as specified in Figure 1) for the level. Samples of the tasks set in Part I and Parts II/III of the examination at Basic level in 1981 are shown in Figures 2 and 3.

A number of points emerge from this bald summary. First, the roles of interlocutor and assessor are separated. This reflects a deliberate attempt to give the examination a "human face" and to lessen the inevitable anxiety which candidates feel. The interlocutor is normally a member of staff from the school or college where the candidate is studying, and is hopefully a familiar figure. The assessor plays no part in the actual conduct of the examination as far as the candidate is concerned. He/she observes as unobtrusively as possible what is happening and stays on the sidelines. In fact the conduct of these examinations requires a third person, the usher, whose role is to explain their tasks to the candidates before they go into the examination room. This is our solution to the difficulty, especially at Basic level, of conveying complex written instructions to candidates whose English may be defeated by them. Even translation, which is not possible given the unpredictable L1 background of our candidates, would not, we feel, be as helpful as this procedure.

Secondly, the orientation of the examination is "educational" rather than "administrative." It is undoubtedly uneconomic to split the role of assessor and interlocutor; it is equally "complex" to organize proceedings with single candidates and then pairs; and it poses unfamiliar problems for test centers to "pair" students in such a way that each has the chance to perform to their best. But it is our conviction that these practical problems are outweighted by the positive educational advantages of a test format whose "washback" effect on the classroom is so clearly in line with current thinking about good pedagogy.

It is perhaps at this point that experienced test constructors will sigh deeply and raise questions about reliability, validity and other aspects of the real world designed to deflate euphoria. Happily, our experience is that face validity is high; both teachers and students agree readily that these tests are a good approximation to what is involved in "real" language use in the "real" world. Interesting work remains to be done on the investigation of concurrent validity between these tests and other oral tests, and of correlations between these tests in different areas. At the moment, however, our main attention is focused on reliability in terms of variability between different applications of the same test in different settings. This hinges crucially on the role of the interlocutor, and we are now putting considerable effort into the production of detailed guidelines for interlocutors and the holding of briefing and standardization meetings. Our greatest help is the fact that the role we are asking interlocutors to adopt is essentially that of a good teacher, being supportive and constructive, and we are able to build on this classroom practice.

THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF ARTS EXAMINATIONS BOARD

EXAMINATIONS IN THE COMMUNICATIVE USE OF
ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE
TEST OF ORAL INTERACTION
BASIC/INTERMEDIATE/ADVANCED LEVEL
1981
CANDIDATES' PAPER
PART I

You must talk with a teacher for about 5 minutes. While you are talking, an Assessor will be listening to what you and the teacher say.

You now have a few minutes to study the programme of evening classes before discussing it with the teacher. You should choose 3 activities that interest you and that are suitable for your level of English. If you need advice on the different activities, the teacher will be able to help you.

© RSA 1981
Reprinted with permission.

Figure 2. Sample of basic level tasks for Part I.

RSA SCHOOL OF ENGLISH

In addition to your general English classes, you should choose 3 activities from the programme of evening classes below.

Please note that the activities marked with an asterisk (*) are only suitable for students with an intermediate or Advanced level of English.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
19.00 to 20.30	Conversation Practice *or* Study Skills* *(If you choose this class, give your teacher as much information as you can about your future study plans)*	Translation* *(Ask your teacher which languages are available)* *or* Language Games	Handwriting *or* English Literature* *(If you choose this class, tell your teacher what kind of Literature you are most interested in)*	Business English* *(Tell your teacher which areas of Business Studies you are interested in)* *or* Language Teaching Film	Language Learning Songs *or* Technical English* *(Tell your teacher what technical subjects you are interested in)*

© RSA 1981
Reprinted with permission.

Figure 2. (Continued)

THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF ARTS EXAMINATIONS BOARD

EXAMINATIONS IN THE COMMUNICATIVE USE OF
ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE
TEST OF ORAL INTERACTION
BASIC LEVEL
1981
CANDIDATES' PAPER
PART II/III

For part II of the examination you must do one of the tasks on this sheet with a fellow-student. When you go into the examination room, the examiner will tell you which task you must do and will explain anything you do not understand. When you have completed the task, a teacher will come into the room. You must explain to him/her what you have done in your task and what you have decided to do. This is part III of the test.

TASK 1 You have been invited to take part in a radio programme in which foreign students are asked for their views on life in Britain. To prepare you for the programme, the examiner will give you a list of points to consider. Discuss these with your fellow student and compare your opinions.

TASK 2 You and your fellow student have won first prise in a competition. The prize is a weekend for two in London with all expenses paid. The examiner will give you a list of suggestions to help you plan your weekend. Discuss these with your fellow student and decide how you would like to spend your time.

© RSA 1981
Reprinted with permission.

Figure 3. Sample of basic level tasks for Part II/III.

The question of marker-marker (inter-rater) reliability, which has traditionally haunted "subjective" tests, causes us very few problems, and it is perhaps worth considering briefly why.

The assessor is asked to evaluate the candidate's performance in terms of the criteria set out in the chart in Figure 1. This may seem at first sight a daunting task, but in fact it turns out to be much more straightforward. Firstly, all the candidates presenting themselves in a given session are entering at the same level, so the assessor need only be concerned with one column of the chart at a time. Secondly, the question to be answered is not an open one ("How good is the candidate?") but a closed one ("Is the candidate good enough to meet these criteria?"). And the answer is to be based on a global consideration of *all* the criteria. If they are all met, the candidate passes; if not, the candidate fails.

Of course, the criteria themselves are subjective. What is a "fair" range? What are "more complex" utterances? How much is "little" strain? But it is in terms like this that communication operates and we find that teachers have no difficulty in working within this framework as assessors with very high reliability.

Language in use is a qualitative, not essentially a quantitative, phenomenon. In testing as in teaching we need to break away from the idea that a language is merely the sum of its parts. This represents the road that we are following; we're enjoying the journey.[2]

---

[2]The full specifications, and sample papers, for these examinations can be obtained from: Royal Society of Arts Examinations Board, Murray Road, Orpington, Kent, BR5 3RB. Price: £1.00 plus £1.20 airmail.